DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 352 CG 025 754

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TITLE Peer Consultation as a Form of Supervision. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Greensboro, NC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CG-94-20
PUB DATE Apr 94
CONTRACT RR93002004
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Consultants; *Consultation Programs; *Counselors; Counselor Training; *Peer Counseling; Peer Relationship; *Supervision; *Supervisory Methods
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the use of peer consultation as a form of counselor supervision, proposing that peer supervision and consultation may be potentially effective approaches to increasing the frequency and/or quality of supervision available to a counselor. Peer consultation is defined as an arrangement in which peers work together for mutual benefit and is further seen as a process in which critical and supportive feedback is emphasized while evaluation is deemphasized. A number of benefits to counselors offered by peer consultation experiences are listed. Peer supervision and consultation models are briefly reviewed, including the Structured Peer Consultation Model. Research on peer consultation is also reviewed. The digest concludes that research is providing accumulating support for the value of peer consultation/supervision experiences for professional counselors. Future researchers are called upon to continue to attempt to identify and quantify the unique contributions of this type of experience for counselor development. Contains 9 references. (NB)

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ED 372 352

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

April 1994 EDO-CG-94-20

Peer Consultation as a Form of Supervision

James M. Benshoff

The importance of extensive, high-quality counseling supervision has become increasingly recognized as critical to learning, maintaining, and improving professional counseling skills (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992). Yet, for many professional counselors, the availability of regular counseling supervision by a qualified supervisor is very limited or frequently nonexistent. Even counselors who receive ongoing supervision of their counseling practice may not have the type, frequency, or quality of supervision they desire. Peer supervision/ consultation (Benshoff, 1992; Remley, Benshoff, & Mowbray, 1987) has been proposed as a potentially effective approach to increasing the frequency and/or quality of supervision available to a counselor.

Peer Consultation Defined

Arrangements in which peers work together for mutual benefit are referred to as peer supervision or peer consultation. Peer *consultation*, however, may be the more appropriate term to describe a process in which critical and supportive feedback is emphasized while evaluation is deemphasized. Consultation, in contrast to supervision, is characterized by the counselor's "right to accept or reject the suggestions [of others]" (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992, p. 103). Yet, the terms "peer supervision" and "peer consultation" both can be used to describe similar nonhierarchical relationships in which participants have neither the power nor the purpose to evaluate one another's performance.

The basic premise underlying peer consultation is that individuals who have been trained in basic helping skills can use these same skills to help each other function more effectively in their professional (or paraprofessional) roles. Peer consultation experiences can offer a number of benefits to counselors (see Benshoff & Paisley, 1993), including:

- Decreased dependency on "expert" supervisors and greater interdependence of colleagues;
- Increased responsibility of counselors for assessing their own skills and those of their peers, and for structuring their own professional growth;
- Increased self-confidence, self-direction, and independence;
- Development of consultation and supervision skills;
- Use of peers as models;
- Ability to choose the peer consultant; and,
- Lack of evaluation.

Peer Supervision/Consultation Models

Although several peer supervision/consultation models have been proposed, some are more closely related to traditional supervision experiences, incorporating expert leaders or supervisors in the process (e.g., Wagner & Smith, 1979). Spice and Spice (1976) proposed a triadic model of "true" peer supervision in which counselors work together in triads, rotating the roles of commentator, supervisee, and facilitator through successive peer supervision sessions. This model relies on the counselors themselves to assume tasks and responsibilities normally performed by counseling supervisors.

In the SPCMs, peers work together in dyads to provide regular *consultation* for one another (usually on a weekly or biweekly basis). SPCMs include many traditional ***supervision*** activities such as goal-setting, tape review, and case consultation. Other activities include discussion of counseling theoretical orientations, examination of individual approaches to working with clients, and exploration of relevant counseling issues.

The SPCMs provide a clear and detailed structure for each session that is designed to keep peer consultants focused on specific consultation tasks, yet also allow for modifications to fit individual needs and styles. For example, a detailed, step-by-step process is described for critiquing counseling tapes. Counselors are encouraged to use these instructions as a starting point for developing their own approaches to reviewing tapes and providing relevant and meaningful feedback to their partner.

In contrast to traditional models of counseling supervision, the emphasis in peer consultation is on helping each other to reach self-determined goals rather than on ***evaluating*** each other's counseling performance. This lack of evaluation and the egalitarian, nonhierarchical relationship that is created between peer consultants offers opportunities for different types of experiences than may be had with designated counseling supervisors. Peer consultants must assume greater responsibility for providing critical feedback, challenge, and support to a chosen colleague. In so doing, however, they also must assume greater responsibility for examining and evaluating their own counseling performance. Feedback from those who have participated in peer consultation consis-

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tently reflects a sense of empowerment that comes from setting one's own goals, making the process of peer consultation work, and finding structure and direction for themselves within the framework of the model (cf., Benshoff & Paisley, 1993).

In choosing a peer consultant, counselors can consider several factors. Probably the most important consideration, however, is the compatibility of schedules and the commitment to meet on a regular basis. Counselors may wish to choose a peer consultant who works in a similar work setting or may wish to get a different perspective from a counselor in another type of counseling setting. Similarly, counselors may wish to choose a peer consultant who shares a similar theoretical approach to counseling or someone with a different theoretical approach who can help to broaden their perspectives on client issues. To be successful, the peer consultation process requires counselors to be motivated, to commit to meeting with each other on a regular basis, and to be open to giving and receiving critical feedback (as well as support) on counseling skills.

Research on Peer Consultation

A growing body of empirical evidence supports potential contributions of peer consultation. Seligman (1978) found that peer supervision helped to increase counselor trainees' levels of empathy, respect, genuineness, and concreteness. Wagner and Smith (1979) reported that counselor trainee participation in peer supervision resulted in greater self-confidence, increased self-direction, improved goal-setting and direction in counseling sessions, greater use of modeling as a teaching and learning technique, and increased mutual, cooperative participation in supervision sessions.

Several studies have been conducted using SPCMs (see Benshoff, 1992). In one, participants overwhelmingly (86%) rated peer supervision as being very helpful to them in developing their counseling skills and techniques and deepening their understanding of counseling concepts. Two aspects of peer supervision were cited as being especially valuable: (1) feedback from peers about counseling approach or techniques, and (2) peer support and encouragement. Another study using an SPCM with counselor trainees suggested that, while the model may be useful for counselor trainees regardless of level of counseling experience, participation in peer consultation may have a greater impact on factors such as self-confidence and comfort level (which were not assessed) than on actual counseling effectiveness. A third study, in which types of verbalizations used by peer consultants (beginning counselors) were examined, confirmed that peer consultants were, in fact, able to use basic helping skills to provide consultation to their colleagues. School counselors who used an SPCM (Benshoff & Paisley, 1993) were overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic about the value of structured peer consultation, citing the structure that the model provides as being particularly important. Paraprofessionals (college resident assistants) expressed similar enthusiasm for their peer experience, and felt that they received valuable support, new ideas, and assistance with problem-solving from their peer consultants (Benshoff, 1993).

Conclusion

Research provides accumulating support for the value of peer consultation/supervision experiences for professional counselors. Although counselors have been enthusiastic about their experiences, it has been difficult to identify appropriate outcome measures for peer consultation. Future researchers should continue to attempt to identify and quantify the unique contributions of this type of experience for counselor development. In addition, peer consultation models should be compared to traditional counseling supervision experiences to determine the relative contributions of each to the continuing development of professional counselors.

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